

Concrete Steps that Bring Us Closer to God

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What are some concrete steps that we can take to bring ourselves closer to God, to more strongly sense His presence and His impact in our lives? Here are some suggestions:

Reach out, serve and meet the needs of one's fellow human beings—especially one's adversaries, antagonists, challengers, rivals, foes, opponents, and enemies—in a truly self-sacrificial manner. Feel the real impact of giving. Give to and beyond the point where it actually affects your own standard of living. Do this with a sense of purpose and commitment, without “picking and choosing”, and without passing judgment.

Forgive everyone in your life. Let go of resentment. Let go of grudges. Forgive, even while remembering the pain of being wronged. Forgive for the sake of your own soul, your own peace, your own ability to grow towards God, the ultimate Forgiver. Don't forget to forgive yourself. “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us” (The Lord's Prayer).

Build good habits and break bad habits. Fight sin in your life. Build virtue. Our Lord said, “...the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force” (Matthew 11:12). This means that we are to be consistently tough on ourselves, while being unfailing merciful towards others. There is an essential place for self-discipline (asceticism, “podvig”) in our lives. There is a place for boundaries in our lives. There are “things we do, and things we do not do.” Until we do more than simply “try” to live the life in Christ, we cannot expect to sense the presence of God in our lives. “Trying” is not good enough, we must “do”! Saint James writes in his Epistle, “...be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22). To be a Christian is to engage in a way of life—it is not simply to hold a set of beliefs, to endorse a collection of ideas. God makes Himself known to those who act, and not to those who simply talk. Our Lord said, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock” (Matthew 7:24).

Read the Holy Scriptures. Read the Four Gospels. Read the Psalms. Read the Letters of Saints Paul. Read the Proverbs. Read the Prophets. Read the Books of Genesis and Exodus. Read it all! Expose yourself to God's Word and let it convict you, let it find you “where you live.” Humble yourself before the Word of God. Trust in its wisdom. If it confuses you, pray God that He will guide you along the path of understanding. Avail yourself of those around you who are educated as to the Church's traditional and canonical interpretations of the “hard sayings.” When challenged (or even dismayed) by the Word of God, do not turn away from it. Seek rather to allow the Word of God to penetrate you and to move you, remembering the specific words that God has given us through the Prophets: “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways’, says the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’” (The Prophet Isaiah 55:8-9).

Pray. Pray even and especially when you do not feel like praying. Pray when it is hard to pray. Pray when you wonder if anyone is listening. Pray with the bold words of the Psalmist, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1). Turn to God in prayer with total openness, with total humility, demanding nothing, expecting nothing, and then He will, in His time, come to you. Give prayer the time and effort it deserves. Nothing is ever accomplished by activities—physical or spiritual—that do not involve a serious commitment of time and energy. There are no “quick fixes.” Prayer is unceasingly demanding. It requires toughness, discipline, commitment, courage, vulnerability, the willingness to suffer, and more. Like almost any accomplishment that is worthwhile, it is hard. Those who put in the work may—if God judges it necessary to salvation—reap the rewards of steadfastness in prayer. God knows what to do with us—each and every one of us!

Take full advantage of what the Church (even as a merely human institution) offers, and demand more. Resist the deadly and disastrous temptation to make involvement in Church life optional behavior. Bury yourself in the life of the Church, in the life of your local parish. Attend every service. Ask the pastor to schedule more of them. Participate in every endeavor and enterprise in Parish life—worship opportunities, educational sessions, social interactions, outreach initiatives, fundraising work, administrative duties—participate in it all, cheerfully and with a positive spirit. Participate not simply for the sake of “activity”, but rather to make concrete your commitment to making your local parish as wonderfully and radically Gospel-oriented as is humanly possible. If—as is virtually inevitable—you are hurt along the way, do not, under any circumstances, either take it personally or abandon the enterprise. In the words of our Lord, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). Humility and steadfastness are the necessary qualities, and are the characteristics of our behavior that bear fruit.

Finally, repent. Repent. Change your mind. Turn away from and give up all negativity and pessimism. Do not give in to despondency. Do not give up in the face of challenges. Rather go on along the Way that our Lord Jesus Christ has blazed and pioneered for us. Turn away from darkness and run to the light. Remember the words of Our Lord when He appeared to His disciples after His Resurrection, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ...see that it is I myself.” (Luke 24:38-39). Participate in the sacramental life of the Church. Come for the Sacrament of Confession in order to confess—with relentless honesty and unstinting dedication to the truth—that which is broken and sinful in your life. Repent and confess that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is God, that Jesus is the Savior. Live in function of this belief. Make the “leap of faith”, for that leap is reasonable and fruitful! We have seen this in the lives of God’s holy ones, the saints. Let us remember God’s words as revealed to us and recorded in the Book of Proverbs, “I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me.” (Proverbs 8:17).

